

**Basic Pet Care**  
**ALTERNATIVE VETERINARY MEDICINE CENTRE**  
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**BASIC PET CARE**

Where would we be without our pets? Having a pet is so much a part of the British way of life that we are called a 'nation of animal lovers'. In order for this to be the case, there has to be a benefit in it for the humans in the relationship. They give us companionship. It is clear how dogs and cats interact with us but so do most species of pet, at their own level. They give us, in many cases, unconditional and unquestioning love. Who can deny the unbounded pleasure we derive from a dog's unvaried greeting every morning? No tantrums, no sulks. He's there and delighted to see us, whatever the day, whatever the weather. Pets provide an endless source of amusement and distraction. Their activity and sense of play can occupy the onlooker for hours, quite without boredom. They can provide direct therapy, in that animals are great healers. When a real empathy has been established, between pet and human, it is surprising how an animal can direct his energies in a healing fashion, which may even go so far as to be at a physical cost to him. Many's the time I have been privileged to witness this healing at work. I once met a family who had suffered a dreadful multiple bereavement, as a result of a car accident. The family cat spent the next eighteen months, as the family slowly healed, draped around the neck of one or other surviving family member.

They take us outside ourselves. The very fact that we have daily tasks of care to perform, is something that cannot be put off to another day. It cannot be put away for a week, while we go on holiday. It cannot be ignored, however we feel in ourselves, which is therapeutic in itself. It is in this area, **our reciprocal duty to our pets**, that we shall concentrate this month.

Our duty of care falls into several different general categories: housing and environment, bedding, exercise, water and food, grooming, hygiene and cleaning, disease prevention and parasite control. Of course, with so many species and their very different requirements ([horses and ponies](#), [donkeys](#), [dogs](#), [cats](#), [birds](#), [rabbits](#), [goats](#), [ferrets](#), [cage mammals](#), [reptiles](#) etc.), we cannot go

into great detail in such a short article. We shall give a general overview. If specific questions arise, please [e-mail](#).

## **Housing & environment**

Each species has its own requirements but, in general, we must provide quarters that protect from dampness and extremes of temperature, draft or direct sunlight. The environment must satisfy the species' need for privacy or companionship. It must provide protection from predators or bullying. It must be a rich enough environment to allow some expression of the species' normal behaviour pattern. There may be special needs, such as perching facilities tailored to suit each bird species. These general points apply, whether for a gerbil or a dog, a cat or a horse and must influence our choice of pet in the first place, depending upon our ability to provide these things. If the pet's home is a cage, make sure it is large enough, clean enough and interesting enough. Allow times of freedom from the cage. Stainless steel is preferable for cages, as galvanised wires can be toxic, if chewed or gnawed. Bird perches should be the correct diameter for the species. Consult a vet with a special interest in your chosen species, if in doubt.

Stabling should be properly ventilated, preferably via the roof ridge. Roof insulation is also valuable in improving air quality and ventilation.

## **Bedding**

Similar general rules apply, in that the bedding is, for some, a provision of a comfortable place to lie and for others a part of behavioural needs. It must be non-toxic and of suitable material for its purpose. For instance, a dog needs a warm, comfortable and hygienic bed, away from risk of either accidental treading or scalding with spillages from cooking (for example). Cotton is possibly the best material for direct contact, although, since cotton is perhaps the biggest user of agro-chemicals on the planet, we should consider organic cotton. It should not be washed in petrochemical reagents but ecological washing reagents are good. A horse, on the other hand, requires somewhere to lie that protects him from unforgiving concrete, prevents slipping and is able to absorb urine and excreta. Rubber mats should be considered. Shavings are not good for feet and can promote harmful ammonia production. A small rodent requires bedding to provide also a degree of privacy. Consult a vet with a special interest in your chosen species, if in doubt.

## **Exercise**

Again, species needs must be met. Most dogs require copious quantities of outdoor exercise. A cat can, at a pinch, spend his entire life in a house, if the

environment is suitably designed. A horse is a running animal and should not be confined to a stable for long periods in the day. A caged rodent requires facilities to exercise legs and heart, e.g. by use of exercise toys or periods outside the cage. A bird needs to be able to stretch his wings and fly.

### **Water and food**

Clean spring or filtered water should be 'ad lib' and replaced at least daily. Receptacles should be cleaned daily (especially important for cats, who are very susceptible to food poisoning). They should not be plastic, if possible. The best dishes are ceramic, pottery, china or earthenware. Glass is also good, if breakages do not represent a safety hazard. Food should be suited to the evolved requirement of **each species**. It is an essential component of health and unsuitable diets are, conversely, a potent cause of disease or ill-health. Everyone probably knows, by now, my preference for natural, unprocessed fresh, preferably organic food, rather than the unknown quantity that manufactured food represents. These common sense principles apply, whatever the species. Cats and dogs require raw meat and bones. Horses require a diet wholly free of animal by-products, with good quality fibre rather than cereal-based feeds. Birds require indigenous seeds or other food, dictated by their wild food source in their native habitat. It must be remembered that caged animals are wholly dependent upon us for every nutrient, having no opportunity whatever to forage for themselves. See also: <http://www.naturalfeeding.co.uk>

### **Grooming, hygiene and cleaning**

Some species, such as birds and small rodents, are best left to groom themselves. Birds have special ways of keeping feathers healthy and correctly positioned. Horses, ponies, dogs and cats, however, derive great pleasure from the grooming experience and, for some, it is an important health issue. Be careful to use equipment which is suitable for its purpose and which cannot cause injury to delicate skin or bony areas. If a long-coated animal becomes 'matted', it may be necessary to cut out the offending mats of hair with clippers or blunt-ended scissors, or seek professional help.

It is important to check around the base of the tail for urine or faecal contamination of the coat, since this can represent a health risk to the animal and to his human companions. This should definitely be a daily task in the summer, when flies can lay eggs on soiled coat (especially in the case of rabbits or old dogs), with a risk of maggot infestation.

Cages and bedding should be cleaned daily and, if washing is necessary, well dried (preferably in the sun) before re-using. Vacuum cleaning is very important for dogs and cats, as part of a flea control programme (see later). Rabbits are a

special case, in that they have two sorts of droppings. Access to the greener, crumbly type is important, since they re-ingest these to harvest vitamins and other nutrients. If cleaning is too scrupulous and if this fact is not known, dietary deficiencies can arise.

If an animal ever requires washing and water is not sufficient for the task, a very gentle soap should be used, which should be thoroughly rinsed afterwards. Over washing, especially with shampoos, is not good for skin or coat. We see this not uncommonly in dogs. It is important that the animal is either dried or is able to self-dry, without chilling. Dogs should not be allowed to go to bed wet or damp, for fear of rheumatism.

It is always advisable to accustom your pet to the examination and handling of mouth and feet, so that mouth and tooth examination and toe-nail clipping are not traumatic for the pet, should they become necessary. Unless the feet are used in a natural way, on surfaces likely to result in normal wear of toe-nails, some trimming is likely to be needed. This can be done by a professional but it is also, with a little care and practice, quite possible at home. A good pair of clippers are required. Knowledge of where the 'quick' is situated is vital and, if this is not easily ascertainable, leave the job to the professionals. Many dogs (but cats possibly too) have been turned against this routine procedure by careless or over-enthusiastic clipping (sometimes by professionals too, it must be said). There can be pain from pinching, without ever drawing blood and I believe this is the cause of many animals' aversion to the procedure. The claw will be momentarily compressed before cutting, if squeezed from side-to-side, thus painfully pinching the quick, before it is actually cut. Whatever the species, therefore, whether dog, cat, rabbit or guinea pig, the claw should be clipped from below upwards, not from side-to-side. The claw is a little rougher after this method, than by cutting it from side-to-side, but it soon wears smooth. If wear is not rapid enough to smooth it off in a few minutes, then a nail file can be used to smooth the cut end. The smoother initial finish of the side-to-side technique is not a fair exchange for the potential of pain to the animal.

### **Disease prevention**

Many species have a risk of contacting infectious disease. For instance, dogs can catch distemper or parvovirus; cats can suffer leukaemia, enteritis or influenza; rabbits can contract myxomatosis; horses can pick up influenza or herpes virus. Responsible owners will do what they can to prevent such diseases. The most common and easily obtainable means of prevention is [vaccination](#). This method is able to minimise the risk by immunisation. It is, however, not without risk to the immune system in general and many are questioning its safety and, more particularly, the safety of annual boosters. This is an involved topic and scientists disagree on many of the points. Many pet

owners are turning to the method of [homeopathic nosodes](#), as a result of adverse personal experiences with their vaccinated pets. Nosodes do not have adverse effects but the only witness to their efficacy is the thousands of dogs, cats, horses and other species that have been given nosodes and have not contracted the respective infectious diseases. Very few clinical trials have been carried out and no laboratory work has been done to prove their efficacy (many would welcome the absence of the latter).

My own dogs, cats and horses have only been treated in this way, over the last twenty-five years, not only without mishap but also with no ill-effects even after being in contact with known infected cases of parvovirus and distemper, feline leukaemia, feline influenza and equine influenza cases, respectively. No responsible vet or salesperson can, however, actually claim efficacy for this method, when there is such a paucity of 'hard' evidence. Always consult a properly qualified and suitably experienced [homeopathic vet](#), before embarking on this method. He or she will have experience with a particular product, knowing suitable regimes for its use. It cannot be assumed that all available products are identical or equivalent. It is not advisable just to buy from an advertisement or a retailer direct, since such sources have no responsibility, offer no support and do not follow their 'patients' through life, to discover outcomes.

**Parasite control:** This looks at the control of fleas, mites, lice and worms. Although it is true that a healthy immune system and a good natural diet will tend to reduce the susceptibility to parasites, healthy dogs, cats, rabbits and horses can still catch fleas and harbour worms.

[Fleas](#) are discouraged by the application of 'essential oils' to the coat, such as cedarwood, sandalwood, tea-tree, pennyroyal, lemongrass and eucalyptus. They are also discouraged by feeding garlic, brewers yeast or lemongrass. These oils will also discourage fleas in the environment, which is important since they breed off the animal. Herbs such as chrysanthemum, fleabane and African marigold contain pyrethrum, an insecticide. This compound, or the herbs can be used to kill fleas, although it is not as powerful as modern chemicals, if there is a real infestation. Electric flea combs are also available, that stun fleas on contact. This can be a very useful augmentation of the traditional flea comb method, which is laborious but effective. In rabbits, fleas can carry the deadly myxomatosis virus. Similar control methods apply.

If all else fails, in bad infestations, there are always the modern chemicals, whose full risk to man and animals has not yet been fully evaluated.

Worms broadly speaking come in two types, tapeworms and roundworms. **Tapeworms** can be picked up, by cats and dogs, by scavenging carcasses of wild

animals or by catching and eating mice etc. They can cause a problem to the host animal and are very undesirable in a household pet. They appear in the faeces or around the back end of the cat or dog, as mobile rice-grain-like objects, which are detached segments of the adult worm, containing eggs. **Roundworms** are usually only acquired in puppyhood or kittenhood, from the mother, as a result of a cunning life-cycle device that allows them to continue through generations, by infecting offspring in the womb. Once these worms have been removed from the young pet, there is rarely continued infection by adult worms in later life, since the life cycle becomes arrested in older animals. From this, it can be seen that repetitive worming doses, throughout life, may be a complete waste of time and money, in most household dogs, not to mention the potential risk from the chemicals used. Monitoring of faecal samples, in a veterinary laboratory, is important, especially if there are children in the household, since it is roundworms that can cause damage in humans who become infected. Cats that hunt are commonly affected by tapeworms, so that may require action, however. Fleas and tapeworms also share life cycle stages, so an infection with one can often give rise to an infection with the other.

In horses, worm management is a very different topic. A carefully integrated programme of grazing with other herbivorous species, such as cattle or sheep, not keeping too many horses on a piece of ground, being able to rotate paddocks, feeding garlic, picking up droppings and monitoring dung samples may completely remove the need to use worming chemicals, as has happened with our own 'rescue' horses. There is no risk to mankind, from horse roundworms. Tapeworms are never a problem in horses, unless there is repeated use of ivermectin-type wormers.

Mange in cats and dogs is a subject that is a little too complex for this article. It is best to seek advice from a vet who is fully versed in [holistic management](#) and who has experience of using more natural methods, if you are averse to resorting immediately to modern chemical usage, in the event of a problem.

Lice are rarely a problem in well-managed and well-nourished animals. Similar control methods can be effective, as for fleas, should an animal become infested with lice.

**See also:**

[Dog Topics](#) :: [Cat Topics](#) :: [Horse Topics](#) :: [Bird Topics](#) :: [Cage Mammal Topics](#)

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